

Can Art Save Russia's Face?

By [John Freedman](#)

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Artist Ilya Epelbaum on the political situation in Russia: "We've been lucky. We had a good run."

What follows is similar to a column (they were called blogs back then) that I wrote just before the beginning of the Winter Olympics in Sochi. The pathos of that one was that times are tough for anyone who loves Russia for its deep, rich, storied culture. That will be the gist of this one, too, although this is a whole new set of thoughts. Things are changing so fast here you might be mistaken for thinking we are in a handbasket headed for hell.

A lot of very smart people have said it in differing ways: the history of this land is the history of oppression being alleviated by occasional thaws. So let's be honest. We have enjoyed one of the longest, most fruitful thaws ever to hit these shores. It began, sputtering and creaking, in the mid-to-late 1980s. It appears to be coming to an end with a fat clang and splat in 2014. That's 29 years if you begin with the ascent of Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985.

Compare that to a few similar historical movements. Depending on the starting date you choose, the failed Decembrist Uprising in 1825 ended a period of four to eight years of democratic strivings. Vladimir Lenin's drastically liberalized New Economic Policy (NEP)

for the Soviet Union ran about eight years from 1921 to 1929, ending just in time for the country to plunge into the bloody purges of the 1930s. The Thaw following Stalin's death and the murder of secret policeman No. 1 Lavrenty Beria, basically ran for eight years as well. I put the starting point at Khrushchev's secret denunciation of Stalin in 1956 and wind it up in 1964 when Khrushchev was removed from power.

I was talking to the artist and director Ilya Epelbaum on Friday. "We've been lucky," he said with a grim smile. "We had a good run. What I feel bad for is the young people coming along. What are they going to do?"

What are we talking about here? Why do I think we're at the end of an era? Why does Epelbaum fear that he "had" a good run — that is, why is he using the past tense?

The events in Russia over the last few months have been vertiginous and well reported. But here's an overview for those who may have missed the basic stories: Russian president Vladimir Putin mounts repeated attacks on the press and the internet; he uses the Winter Olympics as a political bully pulpit; he fails in a gambit to stop Ukraine from seeking closer ties with Europe; he succeeds in grabbing the Crimean Peninsula; his administration launches a white-noise information war that accompanied, and continues to accompany, the veiled military maneuver in Crimea; he clamps down on protest in general and on individual protesters in specific; his advisers and supporters unleash jingoistic and nationalist rhetoric — often crossing the line into blatant lies — that rains down on anyone daring to voice dissent; Putin borrows the phrase "national traitors" from Adolf Hitler's "Mein Kampf" to describe those who oppose his actions; the president's loyal vassals engage in public humiliation of artists who chose not to support Russia's Ukraine policy; insane asylums are again, as in the Soviet era, used as punitive institutions; the always-flawed legal system is transformed into an openly punitive arm of the state apparatus; the authorities employ propaganda tactics to split opinion and create animosity and conflict among the intelligentsia and creative class; professors who venture to dissent are fired; students who question state policy are publically smeared; rubber-stamp legislative branches of government fall over themselves in the rush to introduce and pass laws, often draconian and repressive, that censure and outlaw anyone or any action that may be perceived as being less than supportive of Putin's policies...

Is that enough? May I stop there?

At the outset of this piece I mentioned I am concerned about what this means for Russian art and culture.

Allow me to introduce a silly little statistic. It is so silly, I think it has some genuine explanatory value. I maintain a website that covers most everything that is said or written about Russian theater in English. I'm not going to tell you it's a "popular" site because it's not. But over the years people with an interest in Russian culture and theater have often found their way to the site. Since the runup to the Olympics and the ensuing Russia-Ukraine conflict, traffic to the site has plummeted 40%. The fluctuation from week-to-week, month-to-month has always been around 10%. I don't believe the 40% drop coinciding with recent political events is a coincidence.

Russia's reputation around the world has taken a horrible hit. It is again perceived as an evil,

nasty, and – what is most damning — uninteresting place. One you really don't want to know about.

Let me quote some [comments](#) that Lithuanian president Dalia Grybauskaite recently made on Lithuanian television. "Some have said," she declared, "that we should not pressure Russia right now in order to give it the opportunity to save face and to leave it the option of a 'strategic retreat.' It is Europe that must save face, not Russia, which has no intention of doing that. Russia has long had no face; there is only the face of Putin."

You see, of course that isn't true, although I understand what Grybauskaite means. She's talking about perceptions, and perceptions this day and age are reality. The internet, in the perfect imitation of a bad dream, is absolutely rampant with images of Putin. Putin upside down. Putin scowling. Putin pouting. Putin pumping up his pecs. Putin photoshopped to look like Hitler. Putin in Stalin's jacket. Putin called "Putler."

Whether he intended it or not, Putin has succeeded in making himself Russia. At least in the eyes of most of the world. Say "Russia," hear "Putin." Speak "Putin," see "Russia."

For those of us who stubbornly cling to the belief that Russia is another (to paraphrase Rimbaud's "I is another"), this is a disaster. Numerous European artists have backed out of tours and projects involving Russian theater and music. There is serious talk of drastic cuts in the Russian budget for the arts. And it's not just talk. Firm plans to bring Katie Mitchell's "The Cherry Orchard" to Moscow have already collapsed. The money is no longer there. Talk is rife that a law is being drafted to require that theater productions express patriotic values.

Russia, and those of us who are part of it, appear to be headed towards a narrow place between two pincers: that point where isolation from the world crosses paths with the blade of censorship and intimidation. It's looking like a very uncomfortable place to be. In fact, it looks like a handbasket to hell.

On Saturday I ran into playwright Yelena Gremina at a Golden Mask Festival production. The conversation — as all conversations these days — went directly to politics and the impending dangers for art and artists.

"What are you people so worried about?!" Gremina scoffed merrily. "My nanny has a house in the woods on the edge of a swamp."

Pause. Smiles.

"It's in the middle of nowhere," she continued. "We can all hide out there when the time comes!"

Pause.

"Nobody'll ever find us! What's to worry about?"

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